

Sick Calves: How do you know?

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One of the first things junior calf feeders need to learn is how to tell if calves are sick, or may be getting sick. Before you can tell if calves might be starting to get sick, you need to know how they act when well.

One of the signs of well calves is eating. If calves start to eat less, or don't eat at all, this may be one of the first signs of sickness. Also, if calves are alert, stretch their back when they get up, and are ruminating, then they're probably not sick.

Ruminating is a characteristic of animals with a complex digestive system called ruminants, such as cattle and sheep, but not swine or horses. Ruminants eat fast and then later "reprocess" the coarser parts of what they eat. They do this by regurgitating these parts back to the mouth, rechewing and mixing with saliva, and, finally, reswallowing. This is commonly referred to as chewing the cud, and is a sign of a contented, relaxed, usually healthy animal. If you observe closely, you can see the physical signs of rumination.

If you'll watch your calves regularly, you'll better understand normal behavior. Then, if calves start to get sick, you'll recognize the early signs. But if you don't know how a healthy animal acts, you may not notice problems until a calf is very sick.

Now what are some of the signs of sick calves? Well, you've probably already guessed some of them from what we've already talked about. We'll first just list some symptoms and then talk about what might cause them:

- Leaves some feed or quits eating entirely
- Dull eyes, not alert, droopy ears
- Diarrhea (scours)
- Runny nose
- Dry nose
- Cough
- Temperature
- Swollen or puffy left side
- Limping
- Unusual skin conditions

As we've said before, if calves leave some feed they may be in the early stage of sickness. Or, it may just be that you're giving them more than they want to eat. Dull eyes, droopy ears, and general depression also may be early signs of problems to come.

Diarrhea, also called loose bowels or scours, is usually a sign of problems. There are several types of scours. Loose, bubbly scours without other signs may be due to feeding problems, especially too much high grain feed. Scours along with other symptoms may be due to some kind of infection. Scours with blood may be due to a particular infection called coccidiosis.

A runny or dry nose along with coughing is generally a sign of advanced sickness, often a respiratory infection (lungs, throat, nose). If you see these signs in calves, it is a good idea to take their temperature. To do this you need a rectal thermometer. Be sure to get the kind with a hole in one end so you can tie a string through the hole. This will prevent the thermometer from being drawn up inside the rectum, which could cause serious injury.

Don't be concerned if the temperature is a little higher than you might expect. Cattle have a higher normal temperature than people. The normal rectal temperature of cattle is between 101 and 102 degrees, and this may go up a degree or so for some animals, especially during the heat of the day in summer. If a human has a temperature this high, they're probably sick, since the normal temperature of humans is between 98 and 99 degrees.

Some experts consider 104 degrees to be the dividing line of a serious condition in cattle. Respiration rate also can be a guide. The normal rate in cattle is about 30 breaths per minute (one every two seconds), over twice as fast as humans. But this rate can vary a lot. If calves look swelled or puffed up high on the left side just in front of the hip, this is due to a condition called bloat. Cattle ordinarily belch large amounts of gas during digestion. But various things can interfere with this normal loss of gas. Severely bloated calves can die quickly. A sure sign of problems is limping. This may be due to

injury, hooves trimmed too close, or infections such as foot rot. Swelling and heat just above the hoof are signs of foot rot.

Watch for various kinds of skin problems. Loss of hair may be caused by such things as ringworm, lice, or mange. Warts also can be a problem.

These are some of the more common signs of sickness or unusual health conditions in cattle. Again, study your calves closely every day and you'll be more aware of potential problems. It is a good idea to write down symptoms and conditions so when you talk to your parents, County Extension Agent, other advisors, or your veterinarian, they'll have a better idea of what might be wrong.

Ideas and directions for treating health problems are contained in the Extension publication "Managing Beef Cattle for Show" found on the Texas A&M Department of Animal Science- Extension web site at <http://animalscience.tamu.edu>.

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